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From Gorazde to Kosovo: Aerospace Power in Peace Support Operations

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The idea that airpower alone can win wars has been debated since the 1920s, when Italian air power theorist Guilio Douhet suggested that by over-flying the carnage of battlefields to deliver the decisive blow to the enemy's rear areas, the horrific casualties that attrition warfare had wrought during the First World War could be avoided. Technology has progressed since the biplanes of Douhet's time but the challenge to his thesis — how to translate bombs on target into desired political action — remains.

Douhet thought that the mass suffering caused by aerial delivered ordnance would force their governments to sue for peace. However, he was not very clear on the politics of how this would occur. No advocate of the 'airpower alone' thesis has been able to adequately establish a causal relationship between the use of air power and the political behavior of leaders in the target nation. Recently historians[1] have suggested that the air campaign over Kosovo was indeed an example of airpower (or to use a more current term, aerospace power) succeeding in achieving political aims unaided by either land or sea power.

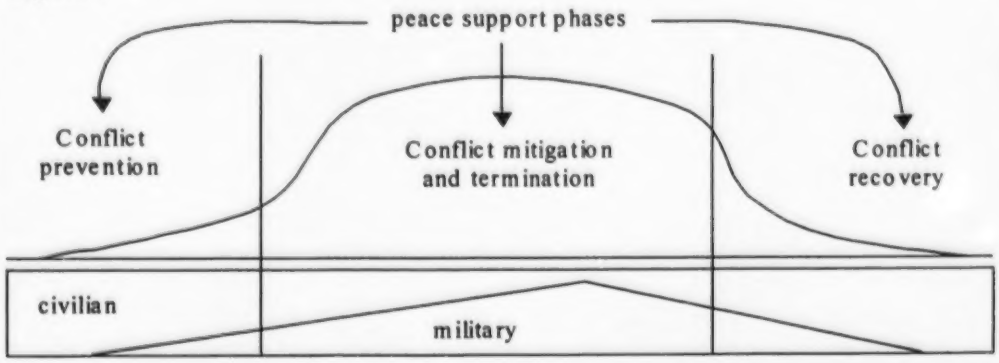
The suggestion that airpower alone can coerce decision-makers merits special study. The purpose of this paper is to undertake an evaluation of the political results stemming from the application of aerospace power in two recent peace support operations, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Coercive Air Power in Peace Support Operations

The diagram developed at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre (PPC) (See Figure 1) best illustrates the complexity and uncertainty of peace support operations. Conflicts have origins which the international community would like to contain with preventive peace support operations. Some of the traditional so-called peacekeeping techniques such as interposition apply equally well at the height of a conflict, such as in 1973 when Israel was clearly in a conflict phase with Syria and Egypt, or in the reconciliation phase of a peace support operation.

Peace support reconciliation ideally should follow any military action that is taken to terminate conflict,

Figure 1



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whether at the tactical or operational level. Stopping conflict is only the first step in advancing to the reconciliation phase. Political movement on the part of belligerents is necessary for advancement along the peace support operations spectrum. This movement can be measured by the degree to which the belligerents are willing to accommodate the goals of their adversaries.

Western societies — meaning those with aerospace or naval power — will tend to favour accommodation in lieu of the alternatives such as partition, separation, ethnic cleansing, refugee exodus, or whatever the international 'community' (and some or all of the belligerents) would find politically unpalatable.

Thus the determination of the success of the Gorazde air strikes and indeed the Kosovo air campaign in terms of peace support operation goals depends very much on whether the political goals of those leading the operation were secured through the use of aerospace power.

Gorazde, April 1994

The political positions of the belligerents prior to the first actual use of NATO air power to attack targets on the ground in Bosnia is vital in judging the contribution of the NATO airstrikes around Gorazde to the advancement of the Bosnian peace process. NATO airstrikes were in support of the UN mission and thus the (in)efficacy of aerospace power must be assessed on the basis of whether the world body's objectives were met.

In February, 1994 the political landscape and the military position of the belligerents changed dramatically. Following the horrific mortar attack on an open-air market in Sarajevo which left scores dead, General Rose, the UN Commander, took advantage of international outrage to arrange a relatively durable cease-fire. Under the threat of possible NATO air strikes, the UN sought to persuade the belligerents to deposit weapons into UN-secured sites around Sarajevo so as to create a Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) in which weapons heavier than a certain calibre would be prohibited.[2]

In Central Bosnia, and in Hercegovina, the bitter fighting between Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian Muslim government was ended by a cease-fire. On 1 March came the Washington Agreement, which outlined preliminary steps towards a Federation of Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian government.[3]

The military balance was changed by these accords. Bosnian Croats had been actively fighting the Bosnian government in Mostar and other locations in Central Bosnia while co-operating, on occasion, with the Bosnian Serbs.[4] The new military balance was no doubt responsible for the desire of the Bosnian Serbs to reach a settlement with the Bosnian government when the two sides came together to negotiate at Sarajevo airport on 7 April, 1994.

The UN's goal at the airport conference was clear. It hoped to extend the Sarajevo/Central Bosnia ceasefires throughout Bosnia-Hercegovina. Before that could happen, a local truce was needed to permit insertion of UN troops into Gorazde where it was felt their presence would deter further hostilities on the part of both belligerents.[5] (The rationale that prompted the selection of Gorazde for a Bosnian Serb attack in the Spring of 1994 may never be known. What was clear in this first week of April, 1994 was that a major attack on Gorazde was taking place).

The Bosnian Serbs, however, were only willing to discuss a ceasefire around Gorazde in the context of a Bosnia-wide agreement. The Bosnian government rejected this proposal, fearing that any cease-fire would lock in place a situation in which the Bosnian Serbs held approximately 72% of the country and the government only 15%. The Bosnian government only wanted a Gorazde cease-fire as it was feared that this Muslim pocket was about to fall.

Progress appeared possible when the Bosnians accepted the idea of an interim general cease-fire, which did not fix the boundaries. The Bosnian Serbs rejected this, insisting on total agreement for cessation of hostilities and deletion of all reference to Gorazde. The parties walked out of their joint meeting on 9 April 1994.[6]

On 10 April, it appeared as if the Bosnian Serbs had secured the tactical ground necessary to dominate the city of Gorazde itself. The assessment of the Bosnian government situation on that date by one military observer was that it was "untenable".[7] The Bosnian Serbs seemed intent on demonstrating to the Bosnian government that if a Bosnia wide cease-fire was not accepted then they would seize Gorazde. Thus, a potential crisis was in the making. Gorazde, unlike the other Bosnian government pockets at Zepa and Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia, had only unarmed military observers present.[8] These had been supplemented on 6 April by a small team of Joint Commission Officers (JCOs) with the capability of calling down airstrikes by NATO aircraft.

Unable to deter an attack with its own resources, the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) had to look to NATO to deter or, if necessary, stop the Bosnian Serb attack on Gorazde before the main Bosnian government goal - a Gorazde cease-fire – was rendered unattainable. There were also the legitimate fears, validated a year later at Srebrenica, about how the Bosnian Serbs would treat the inhabitants of Gorazde if the assaults succeeded. Moreover, it was assumed that the Bosnia-wide ceasefire desired by UNPROFOR would be unachievable if the Bosnian Serbs added additional territory to the large swaths that they already held.

Enter NATO

The *Blue Sword* arrangement permitted utilization of NATO aircraft in a close air support (CAS) role on targets of UNPROFOR's choice. This asset was the only responsive combat capability available to UNPROFOR to bring a halt to the fighting. A ground fighting capability able to reach Gorazde before it fell was not available to the UN command. Airpower alone had to bring a stop to fighting on the ground.

The process of calling in the airstrikes reflected the CAS nature of the use of airpower and the UNPROFOR selection of targets, which was

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done on the ground by JCOs.[9] Two warnings, one written and one by telephone, were given by UNPROFOR before the first NATO aircraft appeared on the evening of 10 April to attack Bosnian Serb tanks.[10]

Although further strikes were made on 11 April,[11] it appeared that the Bosnian Serbs on the ground were still advancing, unaffected by any threat of air strikes or UN negotiations. Bad weather prevented use of air power for several days.[12] On 16 April, resumption of the air strikes resulted in a British Harrier jet being shot down. This was the last air strike near Gorazde. The Bosnian Serb advances had not stopped. On 18 April, the JCOs, who had acted as the forward air controllers in Gorazde and who had selected the targets to be struck, were evacuated along with the most critically injured civilians.

On 19 April a temporary arrangement for the town of Gorazde was agreed to by Bosnian Serbs and UNPROFOR.[13] On 21 April, 1994 a three kilometer Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) was created around Gorazde.[14] Negotiations between UNPROFOR's B-H political advisor (a Russian!) and the Bosnian Serbs, may have been the principal factor in achieving these accords - not the airstrikes.[15]

Did Airpower Further the Peace Process?

The efficacy of the air strikes was, at best, unclear. The Gorazde area held by the Bosnian government was reduced by 20%. The Bosnian Serbs, in the words of one intelligence assessment now, "commanded the tactical position".[16] It was also felt that the Serbs could withdraw their heavy weapons and use lower quality soldiers surrounding the enclave.

One of the UN objectives of the April airport meeting was in fact secured. UNPROFOR troops were placed in Gorazde, although the role that NATO air strikes played in contributing to this is not clear as the Serbs had previously agreed to the presence of a Ukrainian UN battalion.

In May 1995, these same UNPROFOR troops would actually have to fight Bosnian Serbs to buy time for the Bosnian government troops to man their Gorazde defences. Ironically, this UN Gorazde force, inserted after the April 1994 air strikes, had to be evacuated by the UN in August 1995, before the NATO air campaign *Operation Deliberate Force* could commence.[17]

Unfortunately, the Gorazde cease-fire of 19 April 1994 and the creation of a TEZ had no impact in stopping the hostilities elsewhere in Bosnia. Indeed, there were no further fruitful talks between the warring parties for some time to come. None of the parties – the UN included – had gotten all of what they wanted by the conclusion of hostilities around Gorazde. Perhaps destruction of a different target or targets would have been more effective. The air strikes were brought in against targets engaged in the assault, but it is unclear whether this was decisive because Bosnian government troops were engaging Serb forces at the same time.

Targetting had been at the tactical level called in as CAS by JCOs in the front-lines. It had been thought that the mere use of NATO airpower would have at least forced a pause for reflection but this proved not to be the case.

The Kosovo Air Campaign

As previously stated, the Gorazde air strikes were an attempt to use aerospace power primarily against Bosnian Serb forces. Its goals were to create the conditions for a province-wide cease-fire, to deter or stop behaviour unacceptable to the international community — namely a ground assault against a so-called "safe haven" packed with defenceless civilians — and to permit the insertion of an international force to provide a stabilizing presence. In Kosovo, the objective was to deter and, if necessary, stop an even more distasteful activity — alleged 'ethnic cleansing' committed by Serb forces under the guise of suppressing separatism and terrorism by factions within the Kosovar Albanian community. The threat of airpower was also brandished in order to gain entry for an international peace support force into Kosovo under NATO auspices. The force would oversee a return to political stability, if not actual autonomy, for Kosovo. Since the political goals were much more ambitious, it is not surprising that the application of air power was on a much larger scale. The question to ask is whether the destruction of targets in Kosovo and Serbia brought about the desired political behavior on the part of authorities in Belgrade.

Did Airpower Succeed?

At first glance, one could argue that the desired outcome had been realized. Prior to the 78-day air campaign there had been no acceptance by the Serbs of an international military presence in the province. There can be no question that the NATO air campaign forced acceptance of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) on the Serbs.

Another rarely acknowledged effect of the air campaign was its success in restricting the movements of Yugoslav Army (JNA) and paramilitary police (MUP) units in Kosovo. Fearful of losing their tanks and armoured vehicles to marauding NATO jets, the security forces saw little alternative than to remain in camouflaged positions, thereby lessening their contributions to the depredations on the ground.

But, as was the case around Gorazde, it is clear that the Serbs did not completely stop their activities on the ground in the face of increasingly frequent air attacks. Rather, they moved beyond widespread anti-partisan activities and the creation of thousands of displacement persons (DPs) to what can only be described as ethnic cleansing. During the NATO air campaign the Serbs forced more than half a million ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo. The more time the Serbs had to sow the seeds of destruction meant the less likely that reconciliation between the two main ethnic communities would ever be possible.[18] When finally NATO airpower did force a Serb withdrawal, these Serbs had succeeded in driving out a large portion of the Albanians. In their turn, the Serbs in Kosovo could not expect to remain undisturbed when the Albanians returned.

A reverse ethnic cleansing of Serbs occurred with the arrival of KFOR. Thus the political goal of a stable Kosovo, let alone a democratic, multi-ethnic one fashioned along Western lines, appeared unrealistic.

Moreover, the chief architect of this horrific situation, Serb President Slobodon Milosevic, not only remained in power but benefited politically from his people's revulsion toward NATO intervention. This should have come as no surprise to Western planners, given their extensive experience in Balkan politics.

The question is whether any combat power could have brought a stop to hostilities sooner. Would different air targeting have succeeded in forcing the Serbs to stop sooner? To what degree did poor weather conditions in the early days of the campaign undermine the exercise of air power theory? Finally, was the JNA withdrawal a function of the air campaign itself, or were there other factors at play? Did the eventual admission by Western leaders that a ground campaign might be necessary help to change Milosevic's behavior? Did the Russian refusal to provide support to Belgrade convince the Serb leadership that it could not hold out indefinitely? NATO also withdrew a condition placed on Milosevic at the Rambouillet peace talks — namely a referendum on Kosovo's status within the rump Yugoslavia. Was this a factor in his withdrawal?

Conclusion: Douhet Revisited

The scale of the Kosovo air campaign did not make the goals of the West any more achievable than the modest application of airpower around Gorazde five years earlier. In the latter case, the airstrikes avoided collateral damage and inflicted damage on individual tanks but failed to stop the fighting. Over Kosovo and Serbia, a strategic air campaign bottled up Serb forces but failed to stop the ethnic cleansing of a Balkan province. In both cases it can be argued that the airstrikes were *militarily* successful but may not have had the desired *political* effect. The evidence, therefore, casts serious doubt on the validity of Douhet's 'airpower alone' thesis – at least insofar as peace support operations are concerned. Events over Bosnian and Kosovo suggest that there are definite pitfalls in trying to control from the air the political behavior of wily and/or determined adversaries.

Notes

1. David Bercusson, "Air power not to be underestimated" *National Post*, 6 July 1999, A18 and John Keegan, "It was a very strange war" *National Post*, 14 July 1999, A18.
2. Author's article, "Implementing the February 1994 Peace Plan for Sarajevo," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (March 1995): 22-26, provides details on the Sarajevo cease-fire.
3. UN S/1994/291, *Report of the Secretary General Pursant to SCR 900* (1994) dated 11 March 1994.
4. This position of Bosnian Croats up to March 1994 had been confusing. Bosnian Croat infantry were in the Bosnian government defences around Sarajevo and in the Tuzla area. Yet in Kiesljak, Bosnian Croats seemed to be working with the Bosnian Serbs, and in Hercegovina, particularly in Mostar, there was savage fighting between Bosnian government elements and Bosnian Croats.
5. HQ BH Command Forward, *Warning Order, Troops to Gorazde*, 062300 B April, 1994.
6. UN Civil Affairs Kiseljak, *Weekly BH Political Assessment*, 10 19:48 A April, 1994.
7. UNMO Gorazde capsat message 10 April 1994 11:21: 55.
8. Plans had been made to place a UN military force in Gorazde in January, 1994 with approval of the Bosnian Serbs (HQ BH Command fax, 20 0840 January, 1994, *Deployment of a Second Ukrainian Battalion*).
9. Comms links with General Rose
10. UPROFOR Sector Sarajevo 111800 B April, 1994, *Sequence of Events of CAS Incident at Gorazde*, Cover sheet for sequence prepared for Force Commander, UNPROFOR
11. UNMO Gorazde capsat message : 11 April 1994 22:33:11.
12. Unofficial account of Gorazde fighting by UNMO Team Leader.
13. Undated fax copy of document titled "*Memorandum of Understanding on the Temporary Arrangements for the Town of Gorazde* signed by a Bosnian Serb and UNPROFOR representative.
14. UNPROFOR Force Commander , Fax No 5805/3510 dated 21 April 1994, *Agreement on Gorazde*.
15. NATO Press Release (94) 31, dated 22 April 1994, *Decisions Taken at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 22 April, 1994* describes the authorization, somewhat after the fact, for CINCNORTH to conduct airstrikes against Bosnian Serb heavy weapons and other military targets within 20 km radius of Gorazde. The UN Security Council Resolution of this same date demanded, again 3 days after the fact, a cease-fire.
16. UNMO Gorazde capsat message, 20 May 1994 12:44:03.
17. Tim Ripley, *Operation Deliberate Force*, (Lancaster: CDISS, 1999). This book covers the relationship between Operation Deliberate Force and Operation Storm as well as events leading to Dayton.
18. Lenard J. Cohen, "Living An Illusion: Political Transition in Kosovo," *Canadian Military Journal* 1, no. 1 (spring 2000).

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